DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 479 124 CS 512 351

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TITLE Delving into the Role of the High School Reading Specialist.

PUB DATE 2003-05-06

NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (48th, Orlando, FL, May 4-8, 2003).

PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS

DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; *Educational Environment; High Schools; *Literacy; *Reading Consultants; *Reading Strategies; Teacher Education

ABSTRACT

High school reading specialists possess specialized knowledge and have the potential to positively affect adolescent literacy growth. Research on the role of the high school reading specialist can create a better understanding of depth and breadth of that role and provide a comprehensive portrayal of the role. This outline lists literacy problems facing schools and the ways in which reading specialists can address these problems. It explains the importance of reading specialists and provides a review of literature on the subject. The outline also details the results of a study determining the role and influence of the reading specialist. It describes the role of the reading specialist inside the classroom, outside the classroom, and in helping teachers. (PM)

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ED 479 124

Delving into the Role of the High School Reading Specialist

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Problem

- Literacy demands increasing (Moore et al., 1999)
- Literacy growth flat (Digest of Educational Statistics, 1999)
- Content teachers focus on coverage (Bintz, 1997; Carter & Klotz, 1991)
- Use of literacy strategies contrary to common classroom practices (O'Brien et al., 2001a)
- Limited funding exists for adolescent literacy programs (Santa, 1999)
- Adolescent literacy issues have been marginalized (Vacca, 1998)
- Reading specialist positions often eliminated (Vacca, 1998)
- Lack of clear role definition (Rumohr, 1987; Carter & Klotz, 1991)

Importance

- High school reading specialists
  - possess specialized knowledge.
  - have potential to positively affect adolescent literacy growth.
- Research on role of high school reading specialist can
  - create a better understanding of depth and breadth of role.
  - increase awareness of potential for high school reading specialists to impact literacy growth.
  - provide a comprehensive portrayal of the role.

Review of the Literature

- Adolescent literacy needs
  - Literacy growth remains flat (NAEP Data 1971-1999)
  - Literacy demands increasing (Moore et al., 1999; Bintz, 1997)
- Literacy instruction
  - Contexts of secondary schools influence instruction (Alvermann & Moore, 1991)
  - Textbook reading limited (Smith & Feathers, 1983; Kingery, 2000; Stewart, 2001)
  - Programs exist with wide variances (Barry, 1997)
  - Successful secondary programs (Schoenbach et al., 1999; O'Brien et al., 2001; Weller & Weller, 1997)
  - Obstacles (Stewart, 2001; Vacca, 1998; O'Brien et al., 2001)
- Role of the reading specialist
  - Surveys indicate breadth and depth (Robinson, 1957; Oyster, 1966; Carter, 1969; Wylie, 1969; Mosby, 1982; Barber, 1986; Rumohr, 1987)
  - Response to change (Ryan, 1981; Thomas, 1980; Tangalin, 1984; Silva. 1986; Coulter, 1986)
  - Multiple perspectives; diverse purposes (Sarno-Tedeschi, 1991; Porter, 1993; Henwood, 1997; Irwin, 1998; Bean et al., 2000)
  - Minimal research on high school reading specialists (Sarno-Tedeschi, 1991; Henwood, 1997)

- High school culture
    - Important to understand possible impact of culture on role because culture may influence
    - role enactment
    - receptivity of content teachers
    - staffing a reading specialist
    - little change (Sizer, 1984, 1996; Goodlad, 1984; Cuban, 1984; Angus & Mirel, 1999
- Pilot study
    - 3 reading specialists
    - Function similarly regardless of role designation: *resource or classes*

Rationale

- Adolescent literacy needs continue to grow
- Adolescent literacy growth flat
- Obstacles exist to high school literacy instruction
- High school culture impedes addressing literacy concerns due to:
    - focus on coverage
    - established beliefs and practices
    - lack of understanding of role
    - relegation of literacy instruction to primary grades
    - lack of funding to staff for position
- Dearth of studies focusing exclusively on role of high school reading specialist
    - Sarno-Tedeschi, 1991
    - Henwood, 1997

Therefore, further research was warranted on role of high school reading specialist.

Research questions

- What is the role of the high school reading specialist?
- Who determines the role?
- What influences the role?

Methodology

- Qualitative interview design (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992)
- Collected data in form of words
    - In-depth interviews
- Analyzed data inductively
- Explored meaning for participants
- Emphasized process of working in the role
- Built from results of pilot study
    - Similar activities for *resource* and *classes* designation

Data

- Data Sources
  - interviewed eleven high school reading specialists
  - worked in one mid-Atlantic state
  - certified under same licensing requirements
  - worked in comprehensive high school
  - subjected to same mandates imposed by the state
- Data Collection
  - 1-2 hour in-depth face-to-face interviews
  - Conducted in various locations

Data Analysis Procedures

- Overlapped with data collection (Maxwell, 1996)
- Based on domain analysis (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996)
- Analyzed across all reading specialists
- Organized according to research questions
- Transcended folk terms-*resource* or *classes*
- Facilitated with NVivo

Results

- What is the role of the high school reading specialist?
- Domains for *activities*
  - Based on location
    - *Inside the Classroom*
    - *Outside the Classroom*
  - Based on people with whom reading specialist worked
    - *Helping teachers*
    - *Helping students*

What is the role of the high school reading specialist?

- *Inside the classroom-*
  - Taught reading, English, and other academic subjects
  - Assessed students informally and formally
  - Provided support, mentoring, guidance to students
- *Outside the classroom-*
  - Assessed students
  - Worked with teachers, administrators, guidance
  - Coordinated school-wide literacy activities
  - Engaged in miscellaneous activities
- *Helping teachers*
  - Provided staff development
  - Disseminated resources
  - Modeled lessons

- *Helping students*
  - Tutored
  - Provided SOL support

Who determines the role?

- *Reading specialists*
  - Factors that contributed to their decisions in determining the role were:
    - Training
    - Background experiences
    - Personal preferences
    - Professional involvement
    - Personal traits and strengths
- *Administration*
  - Factors that contributed to their participation in determining the role were:
    - Level of support for the role
    - Level of input allowed by the administration from the reading specialists

What influences the role?

- *SOLs*
- *Other educational factors*
  - Time
  - Logistics
  - Culture of their high school

Conclusion

- What is the role of the high school reading specialist?
  - Role has breadth and depth (Robinson, 1957; Del-Val, 1976)
  - Job Description: open ended allowing for interpretation (Mosby, 1982; Tangalin, 1984)
  - Taught reading, content area strategies (Roe et al., 1998; Schoenbach et al., 1996; Bean et al., 2001a)
  - Similar activities for *resource* or *classes* designation (pilot study)
- Who determines the role?
  - Reading specialists' personal preferences and characteristics (Ryan, 1981; Thomas, 1980; Sarno-Tedeschi, 1991)
  - Administrations' support and approach to input from reading specialists (Henwood, 1997; Sarno-Tedeschi, 1991)
- What influences the role?
  - SOLs
  - Test scores (Barry, 1997; Sarno-Tedeschi, 1991; Bloome, 2002)
  - Other educational factors
  - Culture of the high school (O'Brien et al., 2001; Barry, 1997; Cuban, 1984; Sarno-Tedeschi, 1991)
  - Time and Logistics (Rumohr, 1987)

Limitations

- Personal perspectives of eleven reading specialists
- Interpretations by researcher
- Presentation of a general picture of role
- Not generalizable to all high school reading specialists

Implications

- For high school reading specialists
  - Understand depth, breadth, and variability of role
- For administrators
  - Understand potential for role
  - Facilitate enactment of role
  - Provide support for role
- For researchers
  - Multiple perspectives
  - Different states
  - Impact of high stakes testing on role
  - Leadership within role
  - Ability to mesh with high school culture
  - Staffing for high school reading specialists
  - Middle school reading specialists

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